

Book Reviews

Pellegrino D' Acierno, ed. *The Italian American Heritage: A Companion to Literature and Arts*. (New York and London: Garland, 1999). liii, 790 pp. \$100 cloth.

While D'Acierno's book may mark the high water level of contemporary academic Italian American studies, it is not "the" Italian American heritage reference volume. There are some insights, but this anthology does not capture the dynamic potential of Italian American studies.

From my perspective as a trans-Atlantic scholar of Italian and Italian American studies, the articles by Barolini, Gardaphe, Bona, and Viscusi are the most helpful to a student trying to understand both the past and the promise of this ethnic group. The promise, however, is only glimpsed, because few poets, playwrights, and writers in the vernacular stream are included. Representing the editor's notion of feminism, Camille Paglia is featured, but Paglia does not discuss the pre-history nor the women's history of Italy.

One innovation of the book is the listing in each genre of books that are in the "canon." In its present form the "canon" appears to be editors' unchecked and unbalanced decisions for inclusion or exclusion. There is a good deal of superficial generalizing, e.g., reference to Catholicism without noting the wide and deep pagan substratum of popular Catholicism. There are fleeting references but no sustained analysis of the significance of Antonio Gramsci (no discussion of his very important essay on the Southern Question), Ernesto di Martino, Luisa Muraro, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Dacia Maraini, et al. for the relevance of Italian to Italian American culture.

This gazette of Italian American experience sometime borders on the banal e.g., including Susan Molinari's keynote address to the Republican convention in 1996 while omitting the cultural significance of *comari*, defining *cucina casalinga* as "the" Italian equivalent of "soul food." The editor's attempt to understand Italian American women ambles close to the inane by entrusting the subject to Richard Gambino and Robert Orsi. Fastened to the outdated and irrelevant genre of the Italian "contribution" to American culture, this anthology's avowed purpose to show how Italian American customs" have helped to shape the American character" evokes questions. What Italian

American customs? What American character?

Pointedly absent are contemporary Italian American scholars who are upturning traditional analysis of western civilization and pointing to a just world. Among them are L. Luca Cavalli Sforza's studies of DNA and the Y male chromosome, confirming African origins of everyone and confirming feminist scholarship on signs of the dark mother of pre-history and Emmanuel Anati, whose archeological findings locate the oldest sanctuary in the world (40,000 BCE) in the path of migrations out of Africa into the Sinai. Also missing are the younger Italian Americans who come out of Italy's deepest traditions of justice. Where IS Mario Savio? Where are the probing questions: Who is an Italian? Who is an Italian American? Who is a European? What is an Italian American vision of the future? What is a definition of ethnicity that can survive what is now confirmed in science and cultural history? I feel that this book could have benefited from touching on some of these questions and issues.

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Gustavo Leclerc, Raúl Villa, and Michael J. Dear (eds.). *Urban Latino Cultures: La Vida Latina en L A.* (Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999). Vii, 214 pp., 29.95 paperback.

Throughout the twentieth century (and now the twenty-first), the specter of a Latina/o past, present, and future has haunted the myth of Los Angeles as a sunny, bucolic paradise. At the same time it has loomed behind narratives of the city as a dystopic, urban nightmare. In the 1940s Carey McWilliams pointed to the fabrication of a "Spanish fantasy heritage" that made Los Angeles the bygone home of fair señoritas, genteel caballeros and benevolent mission padres. Meanwhile, the dominant Angeleno press invented a "zoot" (read Mexican-American) crime wave. Unlike the aristocratic, European *Californias/os* of lore, the Mexican/American "gangsters" of the